Avoiding the Digital Abyss: Getting Started in the Classroom with YouTube, Digital Stories, and Blogs

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Abstract: In this article, the authors discuss a rural middle school teacher's use of YouTube, digital stories, and blogs in a language arts curriculum. The authors also share the voices of middle school students as they learn through this technology in the classroom. Although a wide variety of technology integration exists in this middle school language arts classroom, the authors highlight the use of YouTube, digital stories, and blogs because they represent simple tools appropriate for any teacher's use and can easily be used together. The authors explain how to use these digital tools and provide examples of actual classroom practice.

Keywords: language arts, digital tools, middle school, technology

> Students should be able to use modern technology in the classrooms because that is the world we are growing up in and it is a skill to know how to use the latest technology.
>
> Blain, eighth grade, blog post

Blain's blog post reminds us that the new generation of children and young adults have grown up digital. Our growing digital world has created an abundance of virtual spaces and tools for communication, expression, and information creation and acquisition. How can teachers tap into the vast resources technology and the Internet have to offer? How can they create a positive collaboration among themselves, their students, and the digital world? How can schools use technology to enhance curricula and prepare students for the world? In this article, we discuss one teacher's successful integration of technology into a middle school language arts classroom and various ways to close the digital divide between teachers, educational systems, and students.

We believe that an educational revolution is changing the face of learning and giving a voice to the everyday student and teacher. When new teachers enter the classroom, many are armed with a variety of technological tools to enhance their curriculum, but too often, a digital divide exists between teachers and students. Without reform and the empowerment of teachers and students, schools will widen the digital divide and create an unavoidable abyss.

The education community has a responsibility to properly prepare students for the technological world, and Witte (2007) reminds us that "because NCLB states that every student should be technologically literate by the eighth grade, schools must focus their efforts on bridging the gap between the traditional definition of literacy and technologies" (95). Being literate no longer only involves being able to read and write. The literate of the twenty-first century must be able to download, upload, rip, burn, chat, save, blog, Skype, IM, and share.

Classroom Description

The middle school classroom in this article is located in a rural, midwestern K–8 school. Ransom Grade School has a population of about 120 students. The first author, Rebecca, is the featured middle school language arts teacher. There are twenty-eight students

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in grades six through eight, and each of these grades has two 50-minute class periods daily for language arts instruction. Each class consists of ten to fifteen students. We recognize that these are small class sizes; however, this is typical in rural areas. Rebecca and her administration work closely, and she is allowed flexibility and professional freedom when creating and adjusting her classroom curriculum to meet the needs of her specific students. Regardless of class size and location, the ideas we present in the following can be adjusted to fit almost any classroom.

For a rural school, Wright has an average amount of technological access. There is one computer lab with twenty computers shared by all grade levels. Most individual classrooms have at least one working computer. Rebecca's classroom has five computers in the room and convenient access to the computer lab. Work time in class is often divided between the computer lab and the classroom. All of the computers run on a network, are connected to the Internet, and have Microsoft Office software. The programs highlighted in the following are accessible in Microsoft Office, on the Internet, or by free download. With limited educational funds available, it is prudent to take advantage of the free resources the Internet has to offer.

Rebecca's comfort and skill with computers developed through trial and error. She grew up with computer access in the early years of the Internet. Despite her knowledge, Rebecca accepts that her students may be more knowledgeable about some aspects of technology. Exploring new technology allows Rebecca to incorporate her knowledge and her students' technological skills into teaching and learning. Although a wide variety of technology integration exists in this middle school classroom, we highlight the use of YouTube, digital stories, and blogs because they can easily be used together and are relatively simple tools that any teacher can use at any grade level.

YouTube

YouTube (2008), a video-sharing Web site founded in 2005, is a relatively new phenomenon, and teachers and researchers are just beginning to discover its' potential in an educational setting. Videos to enhance almost any classroom lesson are available on YouTube and other video sharing Web sites such as TeacherTube, SchoolTube, United Streaming, OneWorldTV, Yahoo! Video, Google Video, and MSN Soapbox. Any Internet user can access YouTube and search for videos. A user may also create an account and obtain a personal space to save favorite videos, post comments about various video clips, and upload videos. Users conduct searches similarly to Internet searches, using keywords and phrases to locate desired videos. For example, the keywords *first moonwalk* will bring up videos of the 1969 Apollo 11 landing and Michael Jackson performing

his signature dance moves in the "Billie Jean" video. Whether you are searching for an interview with J. K. Rowling, a Vietnam War documentary, a *Mythbusters* clip, or a tour of Anne Frank's Secret Annex, YouTube has the video archived in an easy-to-use database, run and organized by users worldwide.

In the classroom, YouTube (2008) provides limitless opportunities to enhance a multitude of lessons. Videos that once had to be found, reserved, checked out, and returned are now available at the click of a mouse. A teacher can save videos for lessons in the favorites section of his or her account for easy access or conduct spontaneous searches when necessary. For classroom use, the teacher should be in control of or closely monitoring all YouTube searches because some posted material is not school appropriate. If you would like your students to perform video searches, use school-safe Web sites such as SchoolTube or TeacherTube.

One reason Rebecca finds YouTube (2008) useful is its quick access to a large database of videos. Trier (2007) explains that this quick access provides a way to enhance students' learning. For example, many of Rebecca's middle school students were struggling with the definition of the vocabulary word *nostalgia*. Their young age made it hard for them to feel nostalgic about the past. Rebecca asked them to think about children's shows they may have watched when they were younger. Many of them remembered watching the PBS television show, *The Big Comfy Couch* (Mills and Moss 1993–2003), and Rebecca was able to quickly pull up an episode clip to watch. They began reminiscing about their preschool years and formed an authentic understanding of the term *nostalgia* at the same time. This simple enhancement of a vocabulary discussion provided students with a connection to their past and a more thorough understanding of nostalgia.

Rebecca has also used YouTube (2008) in class to liven up the beginning-of-the-year grammar review. She saved short video clips of the *Schoolhouse Rock!* (Warburton 1973–2000) grammar song, "Conjunction junction, what's your function," in her YouTube favorites and showed it during the review. Students use these songs as mnemonics throughout the school year, and many have reported accessing the videos on their home computers. After watching the videos in class, two seventh-grade students, Rachel and Nichole, went home singing the songs. They watched the videos again and decided to write a song. Using YouTube, they accessed a clip of the Hannah Montana song "The Bone Dance" (Christiansen 2007) and created a song and dance about the eight parts of speech set to that tune. Rachel and Nichole excitedly performed the song for their classmates, and we created a video of the performance. Because students are featured on the video, Rebecca posted it privately on her TeacherTube account. Rebecca's simple video

additive to her grammar lessons began a chain of events that exposed her students to YouTube as a vast educational resource and inspired them to create a new video.

YouTube (2008) has been included in a recent Web site banning trend among many school districts. There are highly inappropriate videos available on the site; however, there are also priceless tools for education. Instead of eliminating this resource from the education community, administrators, teachers, and students need to be taught how to use this valuable tool. The students in Rebecca's language arts class have learned about and connected to various topics using YouTube and other online video sites. One seventh-grade student made a good point while blogging about technology in the classroom:

> I understand why teachers and principals don't like YouTube being available for students to use. There are different videos in YouTube that are not suitable for kids to view. But, I think teachers should be able to access it because there are a lot of educational videos that are in YouTube. But if no one can get into it then all of the educational value is lost. (Madison, blog post)

Digital Stories

Technology has given teachers many innovative tools to use in the classroom and opened up new channels of creativity and storytelling for the everyday computer user. In the past school year, Rebecca and her students embarked on a new journey and created personal digital stories using a variety of multimedia tools. A digital story uses students' words, pictures, and possibly music or sound effects to tell a story about them or a topic about which they feel passionate. Ohler (2005/2006) believes that using digital storytelling enhances "students' skills in critical thinking, expository writing, and media literacy" (44). The Center for Digital Storytelling (2008) focuses on the thoughtful and emotional writing that emerges from digital stories. They have several examples of digital stories on their Web site that can be used as a way to introduce students to this approach to writing.

Rebecca introduced the concept of digital storytelling to the eighth-grade class and asked the students to watch a variety of stories featured at the Center for Digital Storytelling (2008) Web site. The students brainstormed possible topics, then posed a question for their stories. The students' digital stories were ultimately writing assignments with a new end product. Rather than turn in a paper, they were expected to digitally record their script and select pictures to aid in telling the story. When using digital storytelling, it is important for students to focus on the story first and the digital medium second; otherwise the stories can be weak and overpowered by the technology (Ohler 2005/2006). Similarly, Kajder, Bull, and

Albaugh (2005) explain that the first step in creating digital stories is writing an initial script and creating a storyboard before working with the technology.

Digital storytelling is not simply narrating a set of pictures. It is the process of using words and pictures to tell a story. Rebecca gave students the option to bring in pictures to scan into the computer or email digital copies of pictures. They could also search for pictures on the Internet to include in their stories. They recorded the digital narration using Audacity, a free audio-editing program available to download online. It is necessary to purchase a computer microphone to record the audio, but they are cheaply available for $10–20 at most retailers. To bring the audio and visual aspects of this project together, the students used the video-editing program Microsoft Movie Maker. This program is available on any computer running Microsoft XP or higher. Another available editing program, Microsoft Photo Story 3 for Windows, is available for free download. Both programs run similarly to other Microsoft Office programs such as Word or Publisher, and Microsoft has excellent tutorial Web sites with quality user instructions. Video tutorials are also available on the aforementioned video-sharing Web sites. For Macintosh users, iMovie is available for various Apple products.

This was Rebecca's first attempt to create digital stories with her students, and it proved to be a positive and challenging learning experience for both. It is difficult to have a classroom or computer lab full of students all working at different stages of a digital story. Everyone had to share the equipment, such as the microphone and scanners. The computers did not always work. The work did not always save. But in the end, hearing the students' voices in the collection of stories was an invaluable experience. On completion of the digital storytelling unit, the students journaled about what they learned from and what they liked or did not like about making digital stories. Colby wrote that the digital stories "help you expand your thinking and teach you how to use many things." Elizabeth's response focused on the software available to make the story: "There are programs where you can make things and create them yourself. Some let you customize them to be exactly like you want them to. You can add details that make it yours." Monica appreciated the opportunity to create a unique and customized product, writing, "You can make things different from everyone else's."

Blogs

What does *blog* mean anyway? The term has crept into mainstream culture and left many people asking this question. According to Read (2006), blogs "are online journals—a series of archived Internet postings, some of which contain hypertext links to websites and other blogs" (38). Merriam-Webster (2008) provides

the following definition of a blog: "a Web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer; *also*: the contents of such a site."

In the classroom, blogs are highly effective communication tools that create a variety of authentic writing experiences for students and teachers. Blogs can be set up and maintained for free by using blog software such as Blogger, MyBlogSite, edublogs, and LearnerBlog. Blog-hosting Web sites offer user friendly templates and instructions to help create new blogs, and guides and video tutorials are also available on the Internet. Blog maintenance takes time, planning, practice, and experimentation, and teachers must find what works best for their students and their classroom blog.

Rebecca set up a classroom blog using Blogger (2008), and she and her students began learning about and exploring the world of blogging together. Students watched an informational video about blogs on About.com (2008) and read a variety of online articles and blogs before they began posting. For Internet safety and confidentiality, her students each chose a pseudonym to use while posting and can only post when she is signed into the blog. Her students write book recommendations, respond to and discuss current events, and comment on other postings. Blogs can also be used to post homework, a classroom calendar, or podcast lessons, and to get feedback from students. Asking students to post to the blog limits the amount of paper used in the classroom.

While reflecting about the use of the classroom blog, Jennifer wrote, "I have learned that blogs can help you stay connected to family, friends, and classmates. They can also help you be connected with teachers so that you can get assignments or you could comment on their work, or vice versa." Sara commented, "I would like to keep putting recommended reading on the blog. I liked looking through and finding books to read." In our technological world, blogs can be used to create limitless, unique, and meaningful writing opportunities for students worldwide.

Conclusion

Our amazing, ever-changing technological world may seem overwhelming at times, but educators must rise to the challenge of closing the growing digital divide in education. The resources are available and the information is at our fingertips. In an interview with NEA Today (2008), MIT professor Henry Jenkins responded to a question about the impact of the participation gap on students, saying, "Today, the ability to navigate social networks, play games, or participate in online conversations affects the way young people present themselves to the world. There's an informal learning that takes place as they interact with digital media, which gives way to certain skills, competencies, and literacies" (Web site). To be successful in the world, students must learn to manipulate various forms of new media with a high level of comfort and skill, and school must become a place in which students can acquire the necessary skills for technological success. It is time to begin taking steps to close the digital divide.

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